The Kāšif al-Ilbās was the magnum opus of one of twentieth-century West Africa’s most influential Muslim leaders, Shaykh al-Islam Ibrāhīm ‘Abd-Allāh Niasse (1900–1975). No Sufi master can be reduced to a single text, and the mass following of Shaykh Ibrāhīm, described as possibly the largest single Muslim movement in modern West Africa,1 most certainly found its primary inspiration in the personal example and spiritual zeal of the Shaykh rather than in written words. The analysis of this highly significant West African Arabic text cannot escape the essential paradox of Sufi writing: putting the ineffable experience of God into words. The Kāšif repeatedly insisted that the communication of “experiential spiritual knowledge” (ma’rifa)—the key concept on which Shaykh Ibrāhīm’s movement was predicated and the subject which occupies the largest portion of the

Kāshif—was beyond words. The Shaykh wrote of spiritual experience or “taste” (dhawq):

Know that this science we mention is not mere wagging of the tongue. Its contents are spiritual experiences (adhwāq) and ecstasy (wijdān). It cannot be acquired through talking or written texts, but can only be received directly from the people of experience (ahl al-adhwāq). It can only be gained through serving (khidma) the people of spiritual distinction (rijāl), and companionship with the perfected ones. By Allah, no one has ever succeeded (on this path) except by companionship with one who has succeeded, and the achievement is from Allah.

Even if recent academic research has rightly devalued the role of texts in the transmission of Sufi knowledge, none can deny the continued relevance of studying the writings of prominent Sufis. Moreover, serious textual consideration of West African Sufism has been stifled by lingering colonial prejudice of a supposedly distinct, synchronistic Islam Noir (Negro Islam) and by thinly veiled disdain for black African scholars.

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4 An expert on French colonial knowledge of Islam, for example, said Shaykh Ibrāhīm’s books “apparently lack originality” (J. C. Froelich, Les Musulmans d’Afrique Noire [Paris: Éditions de l’Orante, 1962], 236). A later Islamologist, Michel Chodkiewicz, concludes that Shaykh Ibrāhīm Niasse had no direct contact with the writings of Ibn al-‘Arabī (d. 1240), one of Islam’s greatest thinkers. This can only mean it was Chodkiewicz who never had direct contact with Shaykh Ibrāhīm’s writings: the Kāshif is in fact replete with precise chapter references to Ibn al-‘Arabī’s greatest works. See Michel Chodkiewicz, Ocean Without Shore: Ibn ‘Arabī, the Book and the Law (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1993), 10–11. A version of Chodkiewicz’s introduction to Ocean Without Shore also appears separately as Michel Chodkiewicz, “The Diffusion of Ibn ‘Arabī’s Doctrine,” Journal of the Muḥyiddīn Ibn ‘Arabi Society 9 (1991), http://www.ibnarabisociety.org/articles/diffusion.html (accessed December 13, 2009). Chodkiewicz writes in this latter piece: “A dissident of the Tijānīyya, Ibrāhīm Nyass could assuredly find many elements of akbarian origin in the masters of this tariqa. But I am led to believe that his eschatological beliefs owe a lot to the Yawāqīt [of Sha‘rānī], and very little (or more likely nothing) to an assiduous familiarity with the works of Ibn ‘Arabī.” It seems to have escaped Chodkiewicz that